Presidentialization of the Mayoralty in Flanders (Belgium):
Do Mayors Rule their Local World?

Johannes RODENBACH
Prof. Dr. Kristof STEYVERS

26-29 August 2015
General Conference ECPR Montréal
Section 59: Twenty Five Years of Reforming Local Government in a Comparative Perspective: Unity or Diversity?
Panel 002: Local Political Leadership – Mayors and Beyond
1. Introduction

According to Benjamin Barber, a well-known American political theorist, our daily lives would improve increasingly “If mayors ruled the world” (2013). In his book the author defends this rather provocative statement and sees evidences all over the world. Barber believes that mayors are able to solve different kind of world issues (problems with democracy, climate, security, social welfare, ...) if they manage to cooperate with other cities, for example in a world parliament of mayors. He writes that mayors are pragmatists who act close to their citizens. Unlike presidents or prime ministers, mayors are almost daily confronted with the problems of their local society. Barber states with a witticism that “presidents prophesy principles; [and] mayors collect garbage” (2014: 23). In writing this book Barber acts more as a political philosopher than as a political scientist. He creates an attractive futuristic view for cities, but no one knows if this will become reality. And if so, are cities and their mayors nowadays prepared for their leading role in the future? Are mayors strong enough to cope with the still existing dominance of national and regional politicians?

Before one can answer these normative questions, we need to gain a better insight into the local political arena and the role of the mayor. We need to learn how mayors behave in the executive board and in their local party and how they think about these political institutes. The literature on local politics is on the rise, especially the one about local elections, but we lack extensive research on the behaviour and opinions of mayors. One way to approach this issue is by using the presidentialization-thesis. With their ‘three faces of presidentialization’ Poguntke & Webb (2005) created a new framework to look at political leadership. They assume that in the course of time political leaders gain importance on three different levels: the executive, the party and during election(s) (campaigns). In earlier research we translated their framework, that is built to research national politics, to the local political level in order to investigate the role of mayors (Rodenbach, Wauters & Steyvers, 2015). In that research we first looked, in a descriptive way, at the local electoral face of presidentialization in Flanders (Belgium)\(^2\). It seemed that mayors on average gained by far the most preference votes of all local candidates (80% was voting champion) and that they got most of the media attention during the campaign. Furthermore we also tried to explain on a bi- and multivariate way why some mayors got great amounts of preference votes during the last local elections in Flanders in 2012 and why others did not.

This paper is a sequel to the earlier research on electoral presidentialization. By using recent data from a survey sent to all mayors in Flanders, we are able to explore the two other faces of presidentialization. The aim is to learn more about the position of the mayor within his/her local party and within the executive board (s)he leads. Since the survey that has been sent to the Flemish mayors in 2015 is more or less the same as the survey that has been used in 2003, the recent results can be compared with twelve year old data. It is the first time longitudinal data are available to look for possible trends in the actions and the thoughts of mayors. Besides the party and executive face this research also includes an analysis about the way mayors ran their last local electoral campaign and we introduce a new fourth face of presidentialization.

Barber is a warm supporter of stronger cities and mayors. The question if mayors really are the chosen to save contemporary politics, will not be addressed in this paper. This research aims to find the locus and the strength of the Flemish mayor in the local arena. When we ask ourselves the question ‘do
mayors rule their local world?’, we actually want to know if mayors rule their local world more than before and in which circumstances they do so.

2. Theory

Personalization

When we talk about a possible increase in power of political leaders, we can’t ignore the theory of the ‘presidentialization of politics’. This theory has its roots in the ‘personalization’-thesis. Personalization must be seen as a process over time in which political individuals gain importance at the expense of collective political actors like parties, governments or parliaments. Politicians do not only gain weight in institutions and parties, they also get more attention from media and voters (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). It is generally assumed that there are two trends which can explain the increased attention for individual politicians. First the widespread partisan dealignment has led to a looser bond between citizens and parties and ultimately to a more volatile electorate. Due to “the absence of party cues, voters will rely more heavily on the appeal of the personalities of the leaders in order to decide their vote” (McAllister, 2007: 10). Secondly the commercialization of the media made that politicians “increasingly become “media stars” who act well beyond the borders of politics” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 278). Politicians tend to act more on behalf of themselves than as a representative of their party.

Different dimensions of personalization circulate in literature, but one can distinguish roughly three possible angles to approach this phenomenon. Van Holsteyn & Andeweg (2010) formulate three dimensions of personalization (figure 1): who is investigated (voters or politicians), where do you look for personalization (in the media, in the behaviour of politicians and voters or in electoral rules) and what part of the politicians life is researched (politic or private)?

Figure 1: Personalization of politics, based on Van Holsteyn & Andeweg (2010: 629)
First of all Van Holsteyn & Andeweg (2010) make a distinction between two possible research subjects in the personalization literature: the voters and the politicians. A scientist that focusses on voters wants to find out which segment of the population is more likely to cast a preference vote. André, Pilet, Depauw & Van Aelst (2013) and Hermansson (2011) carried out such research in Belgium and Sweden. Nevertheless, the voters perspective is still a niche in the personalization literature. The most important question in this ‘who’-dimension is not whether voters or politicians are the subject, but which part of the politicians are investigated: all of them or a select group of leaders? One can look for shifts in power and attention in both groups of politicians, but we are clearly more interested in the trends among leaders. Political scientists consider the increased attention for leaders as a ‘concentrated’ or ‘centralized’ form of personalization (Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer, 2012; Balmas et al., 2014), and gave this phenomena a new name: ‘the presidentialization of politics’ (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Mughan, 2000; Helms, 2005).

The second dimension goes more deeply into the possible locus of the research: which framework do you use to investigate personalization? Three main angles are described in literature (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Balmas et al., 2014). First media are said to focus more on persons and their characteristics than on collective actors (Kaase, 1994, Kriesi, 2012; Van Aelst, 2014). Secondly the institutional setting, i.e. the electoral rules, has an impact on the importance of preference voting and the electoral outcome afterwards. The openness of a proportional electoral system for example effects the significance of preference votes and to what extent politicians will run a more personal campaign (Maddens & Fiers, 2004; Wauters, Verlet & Ackaert, 2011). The third angle in the personalization literature is the behaviour of the electorate and the politicians. One can expect that the percentage of casted preference votes will raise trough time and that citizens will attach more importance to personal characteristics of politicians when they decide who to vote for (King, 2002; Costa Lobo, 2008; Bittner, 2008; Blondel & Thiebault et al., 2010; Aarts et al., 2011; Garzia, 2013; Costa & Ferreira da Silva, 2015). According to Manin (1997: 219) “voters tend increasingly to vote for a person and no longer for a party or a platform”. Forty years ago Pomper (1977) already wrote about the declining role of parties in the American elections. Finally, political scientists also expect to find shifts in the behaviour of politicians, for example in a declining loyalty to the party (Van Holsteyn & Andweg, 2010) or a selection procedure that is more focused on personal characteristics of the politicians (Wauters, 2014).

At last the authors give two perspectives to look at the increased attention for politicians. One can investigate the shift in attention from collective political actors to the public life of individual politicians or the shift in attention from the public life to the private life of politicians. Among others Langer (2010) is one of the few who threw light on the latter aspect of personalization in her study on the press coverage of contemporary British political leaders. Most of the personalization research focusses nevertheless on the professional life of the politician, just like our study. In their review on news media research, Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer (2012) make a similar distinction between ‘individualization’ and ‘privatization’.

**Presidentialization**

We study presidentialization as a centralized form of personalization (Balmas et al., 2014; Van Aelst & Aarts, 2015). This means that we not only expect that the attention for and the power of individual politicians has increased, but that this is especially true for political leaders. The presidentialization theory states that parliamentary democracies are becoming more and more like their presidential counterparts, without any formal structural adaptations. Poguntke & Webb describe three essential
characteristics of presidential leadership. At first the head of government must have superior executive power resources. “As regards the executive branch of the government, the head of the executive can govern without much outside interference” (2005:5). There also must be a clear leadership autonomy. This means that, during his time at the head of the executive, the leader of government is protected against pressure from his own party. In parliamentary regimes this phenomena is much less common. This protection against meddlesomeness of the party comes not for free. Political leaders must show excellent performances during elections or they lose their special status immediately. This brings us to the last characteristic of presidential leadership: the personalization of the electoral process. The authors state that “this follows directly from the natural focus on the highest elective office” (2005:5). Poguntke & Webb assume that these three characteristics surreptitiously slip inside parliamentary regimes, which so become more presidential in there beings, without any institutional rule being changed. They converted this three characteristics into three faces of presidentialization: the party, executive and electoral face. This framework has been used by plenty of scholars and we will do the same for our research on the position of the Flemish mayor. Although the empirical burden of proof for personalization and presidentialization is mixed (Karvonen, 2010; Adam & Maier, 2010; Kriesi, 2012), McAllister states that “the popular focus on leaders now appears commonplace across almost all of the major parliamentary systems, where parties once occupied centre stage” (2007: 571). It’s our aim to check if this statement is also valid for the local Flemish case.

Most political leaders, no matter the scale of the organisation or the political level, have to face elections before they can run their mandate. Scholars expect that electoral campaigns are becoming more focused on leaders than on parties and that leaders gain more preference votes than before (Leach, Coxall & Robins, 2011). Two of the three dimensions of electoral presidentialization described by Poguntke & Webb (2005: 20) are already mentioned (campaign style and voting behaviour). They also add the factor of media focus. The authors assume that media, both newspapers and TV, increasingly concentrate on leaders during election campaigns. This paper zooms in on the two first dimensions of electoral presidentialization as we already tackled the issue of media coverage in great detail in previous research.

Before we can speak of a presidentialization of executive politics, there must be a shift in ‘autonomy’ and ‘political power resources’ from collective actors like governments and executive boards towards individual political leaders like prime ministers and mayors. Poguntke & Webb see autonomy as an ‘important precondition’ of power. A head of government that enjoys a sufficient level of autonomy within his executive, even with the presence of resistance, will be able to achieve his own goals and can be powerful. The shift in autonomy and power can be realized by giving more formal powers to the chief executive, “be it the power of appointment or the power to decide unilaterally about policy” (2005: 8). This is, however, not the only way leaders can expand their zone of autonomy. We already mentioned that heads of government only can handle independently from their party by the grace of positive electoral results. A stunning amount of preference votes can be interpreted as a strong personal mandate from the electorate which can, besides the handing-over of formal powers, be a second way to become more autonomous as a head of government. If a political leader wants to be powerful outside his zone of autonomy, he will need recourses (staff, funding, ...) and especially the capacity to set the government agenda and to control the official communication.
The last arena in which Poguntke & Webb (2005: 9) expect to see a shift in leadership power is in the political party. We might observe the “introduction of direct leadership elections by the party rank-and-file”, new ways of communicating directly with party members and voters and more formal powers and funding for the head of the party. This enables the leader to bypass the sub-leaders and activist strata of the party and steer a more personal course. These are the indicators by which we can measure party presidentialization. Nevertheless, one can’t research this third face without keeping in mind that there is a strong connection with the executive face. When for example a mayor is able to act more independent within the executive board, this does not only mean that the executive is losing influence but also that the party or parties that are part of the local government (involuntarily) are losing their impact on the chief executive. This finding is closely related to the notion of ‘party government’. To be very vague, party government says something about “the relationship between governments and the parties which support these governments” (Blondel, 2000: 1). Webb, Poguntke & Kolodny (2012: 91-92) cite Katz to formulate three essential criteria for party government: first, all ministers should be elected party members; second, ‘policy must clearly emanate from within parties’; and third: the members of the government must be selected because of their support within the party, not because of their electoral success. According to the authors it’s clear that the presidentialization theory challenges the notion of party government, which ought to be the default situation in most of the Western democracies: “It is our contention […] that the growing autonomy and power of individual leaders weakens the appropriateness of the party government model in many democratic countries”. Or to put it differently: “while partified government means governing through parties, presidentialized government implies governing past parties” (Poguntke & Webb, 2005: 9). With this research we hope to find out in which way the local Flemish case is evolving.

Since almost all politics start with elections and leaders are strongly dependent on good electoral results to preserve or to expand their zone of autonomy, the electoral face of presidentialization is also closely connected to the other two faces. In describing how presidentialization would occur in a formally presidential system, Poguntke & Webb (2005: 10) demonstrate what we wrote above: “the growth of executive power and the effects of electoral presidentialization have elevated the president to a paramount political figure [and] he or she will begin to govern increasingly past the parties in the legislature. In other words, presidents will increasingly use the power of their popular mandate and the weight of their executive power to ‘have their way’ in parliament without directly attempting to control or lead parties”. If one replaces ‘president(s)’ by ‘prime ministers’ in the quote, the interconnection between the three faces becomes very clear. In this paper we will also pay attention to this Triple Alliance and try to find out if the infamous three-headed presidentialization-dragon really exists in the local woods of Flanders, and if so, if his faces are all the same height. Now I have certainly reached the limit of using ancient metaphorical language in a political scientific paper.

**Why search for presidentialization in Flanders?**

The Flemish local case is interesting to investigate in the light of the presidentialization theory, because one wouldn’t expect to find big changes there. The institutional setting is not ideal for a sudden rise in leader power. On the three levels we will investigate the influence of the mayor, there are some (formal) restrictions that hinder him to behave like a local president. First there is the electoral environment. In Flanders the mayor isn’t elected directly, but appointed by the higher government (cf. infra). Every six years the municipal council is elected via the Imperiali-method, along the lines of a semi-open list...
system (Steyvers, 2012). Parties put together a list with candidates which they present to the voters. Citizens have three voting options: or they vote for the list on a whole (which means they agree with the presented order), or they cast one or more preference votes (within the same list), or they combine both options. Voting for (candidates of) more than one party is not allowed. The order of the candidates is of high importance because the preference votes a candidate gets are not the only decisive factor in the distribution of the council seats. One third of all list votes is also distributed among the candidates, starting with the first ranked on the list. He/she gets the amount of list votes he/she needs to reach the number of votes needed to be eligible. If there are list votes left after the first has received a seat, it’s the second on the list’s turn. This process continues until all list votes or all available council seats for the party are distributed (Ackaert et al., 2007) This intra-party seat distribution system benefits the candidates on the top places of the list and gives the party a lot of power in deciding who will become councilor. A fully open system where only the number of preference votes is decisive in obtaining a seat or a direct election of the mayor would be more suitable environments for an electoral presidentialization. The local executive in Flanders is characterized by a collegial executive body, called the board of mayor and aldermen. The mayor is officially the president of this body, but the decisions are made collectively, which limits the autonomy of the mayor (Mouritzen & Svara; 2002). In Belgium the political parties historically gained a powerful position, both before and after the scenes of the political theatre (De Winter, 1996). After the municipal amalgamations in 1976, also the local brands of national parties became more influential. Party discipline is one of the guiding principles in Belgian local government and also the “local elections could be characterized as highly party politicized” (Steyvers, Reynaert, Block & Verhelst, 2010: 207). If we find evidences for presidentialization in Flanders, we might expect to find them elsewhere too, since legally speaking the local Flemish environment is not favourable for presidentialization.

**Mayors in Flanders**

In the chapter above we sketched the formal side of the story. In practice, however, things run sometimes a little different. The 308 mayors in Flanders aren’t elected directly, but appointed by the higher Flemish authority and sworn in by the governor of their province. This appointment, however, is a pure formal procedure. In practice the municipal elections, that are held every six year to elect the municipal councilors, are crucial for a candidate-mayor. Very soon after the elections, a local government is formed by one or more parties3. The governing party/parties decide(s) who of their elected councilors will be appointed as the new mayor. In 80% of the Flemish municipalities the councilor with the most preference votes was appointed as mayor after the local elections in 2012 (Rodenbach, Wauters & Steyvers, 2015). Although there isn’t a direct election of the mayor, in eight out of ten municipalities the most popular politician is able to fasten on the mayoral scarf.

Flemish mayors formally have a limited number of competences within the executive board. They are among others in charge of police and fire brigade. In practice, however, mayors take responsibility for several departments. Mayors can for example be in charge of the local department of education, finance or tourism. Besides the formal and self-granted competences Flemish mayors are, as president of the board of mayors and aldermen, also considered to be responsible for the general policy of the municipality (Steyvers, Reynaert, Block & Verhelst, 2010). This means that the mayor coordinates the policies of the different aldermen. The municipal leader is expected to have knowledge of all important local political cases, because once a week most mayors have office hours where citizens can ask them
for advice and help for any possible problem. Mayors are able to follow several political cases, which the aldermen, especially those of the smallest municipalities, can't because very few of them are full time alderman. The share of mayors that work full time for their municipality has augmented the last years. In 2003 45.7% of the mayors worked full time, in 2015 this was already 57.6%. The fact that mayors spend more and more of their working time on their public job, i.e. the professionalization of the mayoralty, gives them an advantage in comparison to the aldermen, again especially in the smallest local authorities. They are able to be informed of most of the municipal issues, while the aldermen have only the time to follow up their own portfolio(s). One can expect that this advantage is also palpable during the discussions in the executive board.

The Flemish mayor has a slightly ambiguous relationship with his local party. Before his period in office, the future mayor needs the help of the party (and its extensive network) to become elected and in most cases also to become well-known to the local public. On his way to office, a candidate mayor certainly needs his party (Steyvers, Reynaert, Block & Verhelst, 2010). Once in office the relationship between mayor and party changes, certainly when the mayor got a clear mandate from the electorate. Now it is the party that needs the help of the mayor to implement their electoral program. From that moment the mayor, however, doesn't only need to take into account the demands from his own party, but also those of the possible other coalition partners and interest groups in local society. It's not uncommon that a mayor distances himself from his party to be more the mayor of all citizens and not only the one of his party members. What also plays a part is that local parties often tend to hibernate in the period between two elections. The number of activities and the animosity inside the party decrease (Bue lens, Rihoux & Deschouwer, 2008). The results of the last mayor survey in Flanders show that almost one fifth of the mayors agrees with the statement that his local list/party mainly functions as an electoral constituency, without assuming a wider role in local political life. This indicates that part of the mayors enjoys some freedom to act, without interruption of the party. We would like to know how big the room for manoeuvre for the mayor is in Flanders.

3. Hypotheses

We created eight hypotheses to investigate the level of presidentialization on the local political level in Flanders, Belgium. The first three and the last hypothesis refer directly to Poguntke & Webb's faces of presidentialization, the four others zoom in on possible explanatory factors.

**Hypothesis 1:** The significance of the local party decreases through the years.

**Hypothesis 2:** The significance of the local executive board decreases through the years.

**Hypothesis 3:** The significance of the mayor increases through the years.

This hypothesis does not literally refer to the framework of Poguntke & Webb but it’s clearly linked to it. The authors state that political leaders gain importance on three levels. The first and the second hypothesis cover two of those levels (party and executive face). The third face of presidentialization has been the subject of earlier research and is less present in this paper (hypothesis 7). Here we state that mayors not only gain importance within specific political organizations and during elections but that their general influence and significance also increases through the years.
**Hypothesis 4:** The smaller the municipality, the more importance the mayor ascribes to himself/herself and the less significance he/she ascribes to the party and the executive.

The first European Mayor research showed that (Belgian) mayors from small municipalities score on average lower on the *party significance index* than mayors from larger municipalities and cities (Fallend et al., 2006). That means that they are for example less interested in the implementation of their party program and spend less hours on party meetings. Mayors from small municipalities also think aldermen are less influential than mayors from bigger municipalities (Steyvers, 2012). We also know that nowadays there are more full time mayors than twelve years ago, which means that, presumably, the gap between aldermen and mayors becomes bigger, in aid of the latter.

**Hypothesis 5:** Mayors who had a long career within the party will ascribe more importance to the local party.

Earlier research pointed out that mayors who held a governing position in their party score higher on the *party significance index* scale. The fact that they held an influential political mandate within their party makes that these mayors attach greater importance to the local party and will act less autonomous (Steyvers, 2012).

**Hypothesis 6:** Mayors who lead a coalition of parties will ascribe more importance to the executive.

The results of the first European mayor research showed that mayors who govern their municipality with a multiparty coalition accredit themselves less influence than mayors who lead a one party majority. “It is clear not having to cope with aldermen from other parties comprising the governing coalition enlarges the zone of autonomous control of the mayor and/or increases his ability to overcome resistance by other veto players." (Steyvers, 2012: 19-20).

**Hypothesis 7:** Mayors who ran a strong personal campaign will gain more preference votes

We already know that mayors who get a lot of media attention during the local electoral campaign on average also get more preference votes (Rodenbach, Wauters & Steyvers, 2015). We assume that besides the amount of media attention also the way a mayor ran his personal campaign will correlate with the number of preference votes.

**Hypothesis 8:** The less significant the mayor, the more significant the party and the more significant the executive.

In the first three hypotheses we already referred to the *faces of presidentialization* of Poguntke & Webb. They assume that political leaders gain importance on those three faces. But they go also a step further: “these processes [three faces of presidentialization] are logically connected, which means we are unlikely to find shifts in one face accompanied by complete stasis (or even counter-movement) in others." (Poguntke & Webb, 2005: 11). This means that mayors who ascribe a lot of importance to their party will do so for their executive but will see themselves as less influential. We will also look for a link between the influence of the mayor, the executive and the party and the electoral face of presidentialization.
4. Method and data

This research in Flanders is part of a much larger European project called ‘Political Leaders in European Cities’, abbreviated to the ‘European Mayor’-project. The first steps of this cross-border research were taken in the beginning of the ‘00s. In 17 countries mayors were surveyed on several aspects of their (local) political life. This resulted in a common book “The European Mayor”, edited by Bäck, Heinelt & Magnier (2006). Almost ten years later a new large research is on its way. The survey of 2006 has served as a guideline for the new questionnaire, which will be conducted in 31 European countries. In Flanders the first questionnaire was sent to all mayors in 2003, three years after the municipal elections. The second research was finished recently in the spring of 2015, also three years after the last local elections. Since both questionnaires are quite similar, we can compare twelve year old information with recent data. In our search for evolutions in leadership styles and perceptions, these comparable data are indispensable.

In the previous chapter the aim of our research became more or less clear. We are looking for evolutions in the mayors’ perceptions about their role in local political life. By combining several linked questions from the questionnaire into three indexes we are able to measure possible shifts in perceptions about the local party, the executive and the mayors themselves. We will use these indexes to find an answer for the first three hypotheses as the indexes consist of questions that were asked both in the first and the second mayor survey. Because of low internal consistencies of the indexes\(^4\), we have decided to do not use the entire indexes for the other hypotheses. Low Cronbach alpha’s aren’t a big problem when the analysis is limited to the descriptive level. For bivariate analyses, however, the indexes wouldn’t be reliable enough. That’s why we chose to use six variables as indicators for the indexes (two for the party, one for the executive and three for the mayor). These variables, together with three indicating variables for the electoral face, will act as the dependent variables for our research. All variables are displayed on a 1-5 Likert scale. From the first European Mayor research in Flanders we know that the size of the municipality, the length of the political career of the mayor and the type of executive board correlate well with some of the dependent variables. This independent variables will be tested again, together with another indicator: the electoral success of the mayor.

**Dependent variables**

*Party Significance Index (PSI)*

The Party Significance Index was created by Fallend, Ignits & Swianiewicz within the framework of their chapter for the European Mayor book (2006). The index is composed of six questions that were part of the questionnaire that was send to the majority of all European mayors. The index measures the importance mayors ascribe to their local party. Ten years after the first round of the research, we put the same questions\(^5\) to the current mayors.

*Executive Significance Index (ESI)*

The Executive Significance Index (ESI)\(^6\) consists of three questions concerning the influence of the members of the local executive board and the time the mayor spends on meetings with the executive board and the council. We have combined the scores on these three questions into one index. These questions were used both in the first and the second European Mayor questionnaire.
**Mayor Significance Index (MSI)**

The Mayor Significance Index (MSI)\(^7\) is composed of four variables that measure the influence of the mayor and the importance he/she ascribes to the implementation of his/her own program and vision.

We only use the three indexes to find an answer for the first three hypotheses. In the subsequent analyses, we will use some of the variables that were put together in the indexes. We measure the party presidentialization on the basis of two variables: the perceived influence of the local party leader and the importance mayors ascribe to the implementation of the party program. The influence mayors accredit to the executive board is used as an indicator of the executive presidentialization. The mayor face of presidentialization we added to the framework, is measured by three variables: the influence of the mayor, the importance the mayor ascribes to the implementation of his own policy choices and the importance of the creation of an own vision for the municipality. At last we also use three variables to measure the electoral presidentialization: the degree to which the mayor agrees with the following statements: ‘the campaign of my local list/party was substantially focused on me as candidate-mayor’, ‘my number of preference votes was determinative in obtaining the mayoralty’ and ‘citizens voted for me because of my personal leadership competences rather than for my list/party label’. We didn’t took this variables together in an index because these questions weren’t asked in the first survey, which make them not interesting for a longitudinal comparison.

**Independent variables**

As came clear from the hypotheses, in this research we make use of four independent variables. The scale of the municipality is measured by the number of inhabitants in 2013. The length of the career of the mayor within his party is operationalized by the number of years the mayor is a member of his party. Hypothesis six talks about the type of executive board. We distinguish two types of executive boards: one party majorities and multiparty coalitions. Finally the electoral score of the mayor is measured by the ‘list king concentration’, which says something about the electoral strength of the mayor within his own party/list\(^8\).

### 5. Analysis

In our analysis we first focus on the evolution in the opinions of mayors on the influence and the significance of the mayor, the local party and the executive board. One could expect that over time the importance of the party and the executive will decrease and that mayors become more significant. The analysis however doesn’t confirm the first three hypotheses (table 1). It’s very clear that neither the party, nor the executive significance index decreased over time. They both stay more or less the same. So does the significance of the mayor. No evolution can be observed. In light of the presidentialization theory this is a remarkable outcome.

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<td>PSI 2015</td>
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<td>ESI 2003</td>
<td>3.48</td>
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<td>MSI 2015</td>
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</table>
The opinions of the Flemish mayors on their own significance and that of their party and the executive board haven’t changed over time. At least as we consider the indexes. When we take a closer look at the variables behind the indexes we notice that there are some minor changes in the answers of the mayors. The most striking changes are visible underneath the shell of the MSI. Mayors consider themselves less influential than twelve years ago and are less interested in the implementation of their own policy choices. On the other hand we see that the average number of hours spent on the individual preparation of the duties of the mayor has risen and that the creation of a vision for the municipality or city has become more important. We can conclude that underneath the indexes there are some minor hidden changes, but it’s very clear that the overall trend is stable.

The first mayor research in Flanders pointed out that mayors from large municipalities attach greater importance to their local party than their colleagues from smaller local authorities. In hypothesis 4 we assume that this will also be true for contemporary mayors. Two variables that characterize the significance mayors ascribe to their local party point out a more diffuse image (table 2). Mayors from the larger municipalities think party leaders are more influential, but attach less importance to the implementation of the program of their party. The correlations give evidence of the same directions but aren’t significant. One can also expect that the bigger the municipality, the more importance the mayor would attach to the executive board. The results nevertheless show that there isn’t a clear trend, so does the correlation. As we assumed that mayors from small municipalities ascribe less influence to their party and executive, it’s logical that we expect that those mayors see themselves as more influential. The variables concerning the significance of the mayor show three different things. The influence of the mayor indeed raises as the number of inhabitants decreases, but the importance mayors ascribe to the creation of an own vision is more or less stable for all categories and the importance they ascribe to the implementation of their own policy choices is the highest for mayors who live in the cities. The averages for these six variables aren’t in favour of the fourth hypothesis, neither are the correlations. We can conclude that there is no link between the size of a municipality and the significance a mayor ascribes to himself/herself, the party or the executive board.

Table 2: Averages of six variables for three categories of municipalities and the correlation between those variables and the number of inhabitants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Smallest municipalities</th>
<th>Middle size municipalities</th>
<th>Largest municipalities</th>
<th>Correlation with the number of inhabitants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence party leaders</td>
<td>2,15</td>
<td>2,40</td>
<td>2,36</td>
<td>,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance party program</td>
<td>3,84</td>
<td>3,39</td>
<td>3,53</td>
<td>-.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence executive board</td>
<td>4,69</td>
<td>4,50</td>
<td>4,57</td>
<td>-.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAYOR</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence mayor</td>
<td>4,67</td>
<td>4,64</td>
<td>4,60</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance own policy choices</td>
<td>3,07</td>
<td>3,18</td>
<td>3,33</td>
<td>.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create own vision</td>
<td>4,56</td>
<td>4,51</td>
<td>4,56</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0,05; **p < 0,01; ***p < 0,001

The results in table 3 point out that mayors with a long record of service in their party think the local party leaders are less influential than mayors who became a party member more recently. On the other hand, the latter category of mayors ascribes less importance to the implementation of the party
program. Again the image is very blurry, no real trend can be observed. The fifth hypothesis can't be accepted.

Table 3: Averages of two variables concerning the significance of the party for three categories of mayors and the correlation between those variables and the number of years as a party member

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mayors with the shortest career in their party</th>
<th>Mayors with a medium career in their party</th>
<th>Mayors with the longest career in their party</th>
<th>Correlation with number of years as party member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influence party leaders</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance party program</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>0.085</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Mayors who lead a coalition of parties operate in a different environment than mayors who face only aldermen of their own party in the executive board. One can expect that the latter are more free to act and that they see the executive as less significant. We find some support for this assumption in table 4, but the correlation between both variables isn't strong, nor significant. Again there isn't proof for this hypothesis.

Table 4: Average of the ‘influence of the executive board’ for two categories of executives and the correlation between those variables and the type of governing executive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>One party majority</th>
<th>Coalition of parties</th>
<th>Correlation with type of governing executive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influence executive</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.073</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001

Earlier research pointed out that there are big differences in the electoral strength of mayors. The list king concentration of mayors (i.e. the number of preference votes of the mayor compared to the total amount of votes for his/her list/party) varied in 2012 between 16.6 and 88.9%, with an average of 50.0%. There are some factors that correlate well with the electoral strength of a mayor: the number of inhabitants, the amount of media attention, the fact if a mayor cumulates his function with another job, etc. Together with some other variables we were able to explain 44.8% of the variation in the list king concentration (Rodenbach, Wauters & Steyvers, 2015). This means that more than half of the variation in the electoral strength of a mayor can’t be explained at the moment. We assume that the way a mayor behaved during the campaign can be another factor that correlates with the electoral strength. In table 5 the mayors are divided in five categories of electoral strength. Mayors who scored better within their party admit that the campaign of his/her party was focused on him/her as a candidate-mayor. There seems to be a positive and significant correlation between these two variables. Mayors who (strongly) agree with the statements that ‘their number of preference votes was determinative in obtaining the mayoralty’ and that ‘citizens voted for them because of their personal leadership competences rather than for their list/party label’ obtained on average more preference votes. Especially mayors who strongly agree with the latter statement seem to were popular candidates during the last local elections. We can conclude that mayors who ran a strong personal campaign or think that their personal leadership competences were decisive for voters to give her/him a personal vote gained on average more preference votes. This findings support the 7th hypothesis.
Scholars who study the presidentialization theory expect that the electoral strength of a mayor can have an influence on her/his behaviour and thoughts. One can assume for example that strong electoral mayors will attach more importance to their own policy choices and will ascribe less influence to the executive board and their local party. In table 6 all correlations between the nine core variables we used before and the list king concentration are presented. We won’t pay attention to all of them, but some correlations deserve some extra explanation. It became already clear that obtaining a lot of preferential votes correlates well with running a personal campaign. The correlations below point out that mayors who describe themselves as influential, on average gained more preferential votes (even though the correlation is not highly significant), and (strongly) agree with the statement that citizens particularly voted for him because of his personal competences and not because of the list or party he stands for. Mayors who agree with the statement that the campaign of their party was mainly focused on them as a candidate mayor, think it’s important to implement their own policy choices. In the light of the presidentialization theory these are interesting findings. They prove that there are links between the electoral face of presidentialization and the way the mayor describes his/her own role.

When we take a closer look at the columns representing the significance of the party and the executive, some remarkable results come forward. Poguntke & Webb expect that leaders who pay a lot of attention to their party and executive will not be electoral presidential and will see themselves as less influential. That means we expect a positive relationship between the influence of the party and the influence of the executive and a positive relationship between the influence of the mayor and the degree of electoral presidentialization. Between these two clusters, one could expect to found a negative relationship. It’s striking though there aren’t any significant negative correlations between these two clusters in the results in table 6. Even more unexpected are the positive significant correlations between both clusters (variables representing the party and executive significance on the one hand and variables representing the mayor significance and the degree of electoral presidentialization on the other hand). Mayors who claim to be influential think in most cases the same about the executive board. Mayors who pay attention to the implementation of their party program on average also state it’s important to implement the own policy choices, think they are influential and are convinced that their own leadership competences were decisive for citizens to vote for them. These findings show the opposite of what we could expect.

**Table 5: Averages of three variables concerning the degree of electoral presidentialization for five categories of mayors and the correlation between those variables and the list king concentration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Electoral weakest mayors</th>
<th>Electoral strongest mayors</th>
<th>Correlation with list king concentration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campaign of party was focused on mayor</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of preference votes was determinative</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>4.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal leadership competences decisive</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
Table 6: Correlations between the list king concentration and nine core variables concerning the significance of the mayor, the executive board, the mayor and the degree of electoral presidentialization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PARTY Influence party leaders</th>
<th>PARTY Importance party program</th>
<th>EXECUTIVE Influence executive board</th>
<th>EXECUTIVE Importance executive board</th>
<th>MAYOR Influence mayor</th>
<th>MAYOR Importance own policy choices</th>
<th>MAYOR Create own vision</th>
<th>ELECTIONS Campaign focused on mayor</th>
<th>ELECTIONS Preference votes decisive</th>
<th>ELECTIONS Personal leadership decisive</th>
<th>VOTES List king concentration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influence party leaders</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,065</td>
<td>,083</td>
<td>,007</td>
<td>,046</td>
<td>,033</td>
<td>-,020</td>
<td>,088</td>
<td>,029</td>
<td>,029</td>
<td>,095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance party program</td>
<td>,065</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>,164*</td>
<td>,241**</td>
<td>,132</td>
<td>,067</td>
<td>,124</td>
<td>,180*</td>
<td>,135</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence executive board</td>
<td>,083</td>
<td>-,008</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,292***</td>
<td>,024</td>
<td>,114</td>
<td>-,113</td>
<td>-,016</td>
<td>,017</td>
<td>-,004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence mayor</td>
<td>-,007</td>
<td>,164*</td>
<td>,292***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,156*</td>
<td>,224**</td>
<td>,111</td>
<td>,130</td>
<td>,240**</td>
<td>,197*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance own policy choices</td>
<td>,046</td>
<td>,241**</td>
<td>,024</td>
<td>,156*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,124</td>
<td>,151*</td>
<td>,077</td>
<td>,142</td>
<td>-,057</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create own vision</td>
<td>-,033</td>
<td>,132</td>
<td>,114</td>
<td>,224**</td>
<td>,124</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,083</td>
<td>,073</td>
<td>,047</td>
<td>,108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campaign focused on mayor</td>
<td>-,020</td>
<td>,067</td>
<td>-,113</td>
<td>,111</td>
<td>,151*</td>
<td>,083</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,151*</td>
<td>,226**</td>
<td>,215**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference votes decisive</td>
<td>-,088</td>
<td>,124</td>
<td>-,016</td>
<td>,130</td>
<td>,077</td>
<td>,073</td>
<td>,151*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,442***</td>
<td>,171*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal leadership decisive</td>
<td>,029</td>
<td>,180*</td>
<td>,017</td>
<td>,240**</td>
<td>,142</td>
<td>,047</td>
<td>,226**</td>
<td>,442***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>,340***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List king concentration</td>
<td>,095</td>
<td>,135</td>
<td>-,004</td>
<td>,197*</td>
<td>,057</td>
<td>,108</td>
<td>,215**</td>
<td>,171*</td>
<td>,340***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
6. Conclusions

The formal rules in Flanders seem not to pave the way for strong political leadership. In practice, however, we see that leaders do enjoy some autonomy in the several arena’s they operate. The presidentialization theory states that political leaders will gain more influence and attention through the years. We wondered if mayors also have the feeling that their influence on the local level increases. The averages of three indexes indicating the significance of the mayor, the party and the executive board are quite remarkable. The indexes are composed of the same questions asked to the mayors in 2003 and 2015, which makes it possible to compare the perceptions of mayors in time. Our analyses show that these three indexes have stayed nearly stable. This means that the contemporary mayors don’t think they are more influential than their colleagues twelve years ago. They also don’t think the significance of the party and the executive board has decreased, contrary to what we could expect from the presidentialization theory.

After all, the formal thresholds in Flanders seem still too high to make a trend towards more presidential local leadership possible. Scholars who firmly believe in the presidentialization theory have their doubts about the survival of the party government theory. Our results, however, made clear that we can’t dump the latter theory yet. More than one third of the Flemish mayors (strongly) agrees with the statement that their local party/list is the main point of reference in their functioning as a mayor. Almost half of the mayors neither agree nor disagree. Eight out of ten mayors consults regularly the executive committee of their party when they have to take strategic decisions. It shows that parties still have an important role to play in the local political arena. We also asked the current mayors in which direction they think the influence over the local authority activities changed the last decade. Among others they could choose between the mayor and the executive board. Half of the mayors thinks there hasn’t been a shift in influence between the mayor and the executive. 30% of the mayors believes that mayors won (a little) more influence at the expense of the executive, 20% of them thinks it’s the other way round. There are municipalities where the mayor has gained autonomy from the executive, but in general there is no clear visible trend. The fact that the Flemish local ecosystem is characterized by a collegial executive body prevents the mayor from gaining more influence. Although the media attention shifted from parties to individual politicians (Van Aelst, 2014), has the percentage of preference votes casted in Belgian elections (national, regional and also municipal) decreased, contrary to what one could expect in the light of presidentialization theory. The research of Wauters et al. (2015) shows that the overall percentage of preference votes has dropped the last years, but the percentage of preference votes for the electoral leaders of the parties stayed the same. This means that leaders are evaluated differently and keep receiving the same share of preference votes, despite the general declining trend. This finding however does not support the presidentialization these, because then we would expect a rise in preference votes for the leaders. On the local level we notice more or less the same phenomenon. If we compare the local elections of 2006 and 2012, the percentage preference votes declined from 83% to 75%, but the average share of preference votes for the mayor stayed the same (Steyvers & De Ceuninck, 2013). To conclude we can state that the three faces of presidentialization not (completely) broke through on the local level in Flanders.
Poguntke & Webb state that the three faces of presidentialization are intertwined and will evolve in the same direction. We added the mayoral face to their framework and looked for links between the four indicators of presidentialization. The results point out that there are some correlations we could expect, for example between the influence of the mayor and the degree to which (s)he ran a personalized campaign. There is, nevertheless, not a real explanation for the positive and highly significant correlation between the perceived influence of the mayor and the one of the executive board. The fact that the executive board is called 'the board of mayor and aldermen' in Dutch could have influenced the mayors in their answers. If they think the mayor is influential, they could have seen themselves as a part of the executive board when evaluating the influence of the board. This statement is a bit speculative and needs definitely further research. The interconnection between the faces of presidentialization is theoretically well-founded, but the Flemish local practice is clearly more complex.

Do mayors rule their local world? In some way they still do. If we take a look at the perceived influence of the mayor, the executive body and the party leaders one can see that mayors still have the most influence over local authority activities (4.64 on a 1 to 5 scale for the mayor, 4.58 for the executive board and 2.32 for the party leaders). The gap between the former two though isn't big and is also not growing through time, quite the contrary. The difference in influence between the mayor and the executive was bigger in 2003 than now. We can conclude that mayors in Flanders still have an important role to play as political leader of the municipality, but their zone of autonomous control has certainly not enlarged the recent years.
7. Bibliography


8. Notes

1 PhD-candidate at Ghent University, Department of Political Sciences, Centre for Local Politics. johannes.rodenbach@ugent.be

2 Flanders is the Dutch speaking region in the north of Belgium. Due to several state reforms a lot of competences went from the federal Belgian level to the regions (Flanders, Wallonia and the capital region of Brussels) and the communities (the Dutch, French and German speaking communities). The regions are for example responsible for the organization of the local elections and they supervise the local authorities. The regions Flanders and Wallonia made other laws on this matter and that’s why it’s sometimes hard to compare the Flemish local level with that of Wallonia. In this paper we chose to focus only on Flanders.

3 During the 2007-2012 legislature 33% of the municipalities had a one party government, in the current period (2013-2018) that number has dropped to 25%.

4 Cronbach’s α for PSI is ,287, for ESI ,169 and for MSI ,250. To use an index of several variables scholars recommend a Cronbach’s α higher than ,700.

5 One variable “the frequency of communication with party leaders” that was part of the original Party Significance Index (PSI) of Fallend et al. (2006) hasn’t been used in the recent questionnaire. That’s why we reduced the number of variables of the PSI we use to five: 1) the importance the mayor ascribes to the implementation of the program of his/her party 2) the mayor’s agreement with the statement that ‘political parties are the most suitable arena for citizen participation’ 3) the proportion of work-time spent on party meetings 4) the perceived influence of party leaders on local decision making 5) support of the political party for the mayor in the recent election.

6 These are the questions/statements that were used to compose the Executive Significance Index (ESI): 1) the perceived influence of the executive board over the local authority activities 2) the perceived influence of the municipal chief executive officer over the local authority activities 3) the proportion of work-time spent on meetings with the local executive and council

7 The Mayor Significance Index (MSI) is composed of four questions/statements: 1) the perceived influence of the mayor over the local authority activities 2) the proportion of work-time spent on individual preparation of the duties of the mayor 3) the importance the mayor ascribes to the creation of a vision on the city 4) the importance the mayor ascribes to the implementation of his/her personal choices.

8 The list king concentration describes the ratio between the preference votes of the mayor and the total number of votes for the party/list of the mayor.